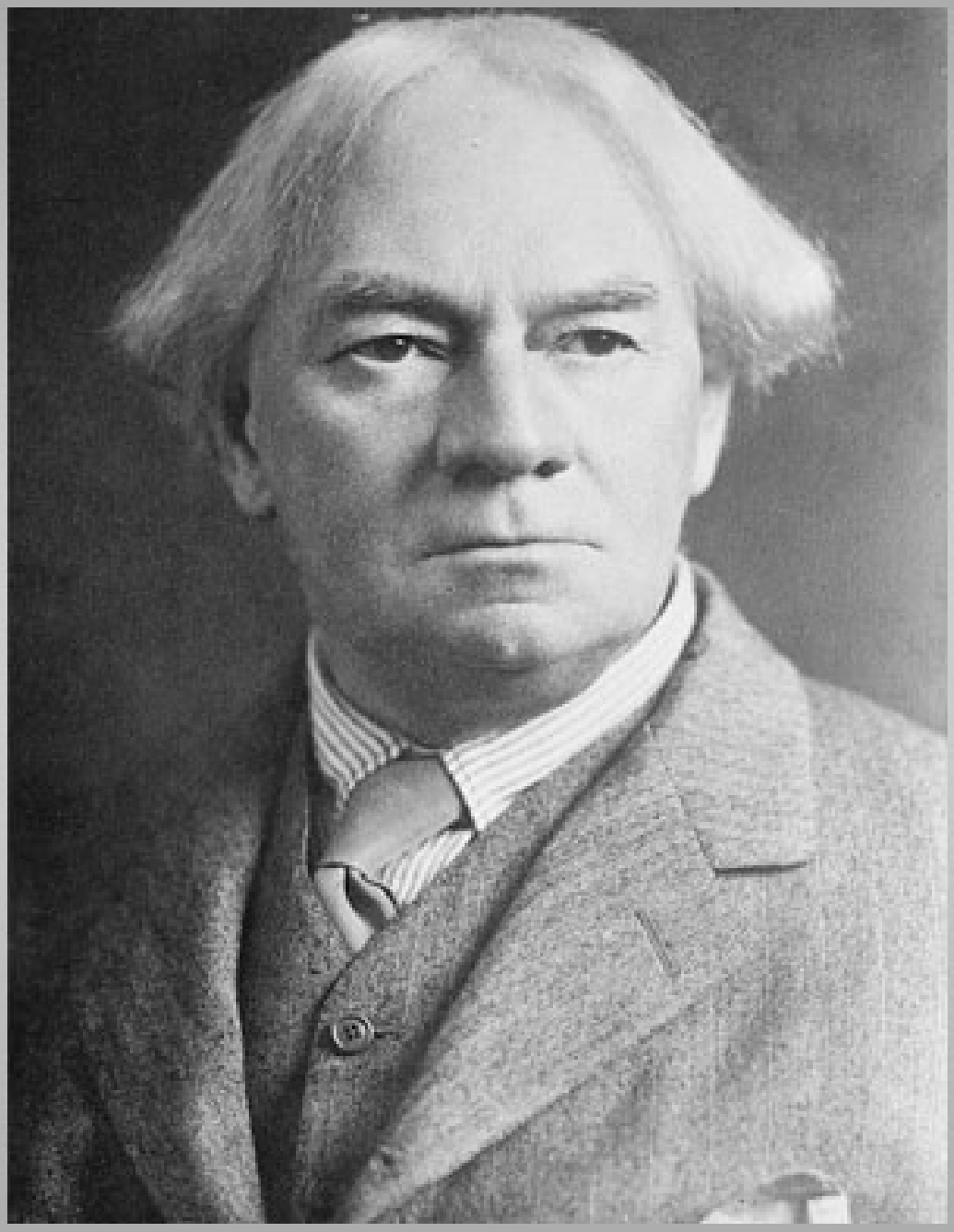
Jerome K. Jerome



Tea-Table Talk

TEA-TABLE TALK

CHAPTER I

“They are very pretty, some of them,” said the Woman of the World; “not the sort of letters I should have written myself.”

“I should like to see a love-letter of yours,” interrupted the Minor Poet.

“It is very kind of you to say so,” replied the Woman of the World. “It never occurred to me that you would care for one.”

“It is what I have always maintained,” retorted the Minor Poet; “you have never really understood me.”

“I believe a volume of assorted love-letters would sell well,” said the Girton Girl; “written by the same hand, if you like, but to different correspondents at different periods. To the same person one is bound, more or less, to repeat oneself.”

“Or from different lovers to the same correspondent,” suggested the Philosopher. “It would be interesting to observe the response of various temperaments exposed to an unvaried influence. It would throw light on the vexed question whether the qualities that adorn our beloved are her own, or ours lent to her for the occasion. Would the same woman be addressed as ‘My Queen!’ by one correspondent, and as ‘Dear Popsy Wopsy!’ by another, or would she to all her lovers be herself?”

“You might try it,” I suggested to the Woman of the World, “selecting, of course, only the more interesting.”

“It would cause so much unpleasantness, don’t you think?” replied the Woman of the World. “Those I left out would never forgive me. It is

always so with people you forget to invite to a funeral - they think it is done with deliberate intention to slight them."

"The first love-letter I ever wrote," said the Minor Poet, "was when I was sixteen. Her name was Monica; she was the left-hand girl in the third joint of the crocodile. I have never known a creature so ethereally beautiful. I wrote the letter and sealed it, but I could not make up my mind whether to slip it into her hand when we passed them, as we usually did on Thursday afternoons, or to wait for Sunday."

"There can be no question," murmured the Girton Girl abstractedly, "the best time is just as one is coming out of church. There is so much confusion; besides, one has one's Prayer-book - I beg your pardon."

"I was saved the trouble of deciding," continued the Minor Poet. "On Thursday her place was occupied by a fat, red-headed girl, who replied to my look of inquiry with an idiotic laugh, and on Sunday I searched the Hypatia House pews for her in vain. I learnt subsequently that she had been sent home on the previous Wednesday, suddenly. It appeared that I was not the only one. I left the letter where I had placed it, at the bottom of my desk, and in course of time forgot it. Years later I fell in love really. I sat down to write her a love-letter that should imprison her as by some subtle spell. I would weave into it the love of all the ages. When I had finished it, I read it through and was pleased with it. Then by an accident, as I was going to seal it, I overturned my desk, and on to the floor fell that other love-letter I had written seven years before, when a boy. Out of idle curiosity I tore it open; I thought it would afford me amusement. I ended by posting it instead of the letter I had just completed. It carried precisely the same meaning; but it was better expressed, with greater sincerity, with more artistic simplicity."

"After all," said the Philosopher, "what can a man do more than tell a woman that he loves her? All the rest is mere picturesque amplification, on a par with the 'Full and descriptive report from our Special Correspondent,' elaborated out of a three-line telegram of Reuter's."

"Following that argument," said the Minor Poet, "you could reduce 'Romeo and Juliet' to a two-line tragedy -

Lass and lad, loved like mad;

Silly muddle, very sad."

"To be told that you are loved," said the Girton Girl, "is only the beginning of the theorem - its proposition, so to speak."

"Or the argument of the poem," murmured the Old Maid.

"The interest," continued the Girton Girl, "lies in proving it - why does he love me?"

"I asked a man that once," said the Woman of the World. "He said it was because he couldn't help it. It seemed such a foolish answer - the sort of thing your housemaid always tells you when she breaks your favourite teapot. And yet, I suppose it was as sensible as any other."

"More so," commented the Philosopher. "It is the only possible explanation."

"I wish," said the Minor Poet, "it were a question one could ask of people without offence; I so often long to put it. Why do men marry viragoes, pimply girls with incipient moustaches? Why do beautiful heiresses choose thick-lipped, little men who bully them? Why are old bachelors, generally speaking, sympathetic, kind-hearted men; and old maids, so many of them, sweet-looking and amiable?"

"I think," said the Old Maid, "that perhaps - " But there she stopped.

"Pray go on," said the Philosopher. "I shall be so interested to have your views."

"It was nothing, really," said the Old Maid; "I have forgotten."

"If only one could obtain truthful answers," the Minor Poet, "what a flood of light they might let fall on the hidden half of life!"

"It seems to me," said the Philosopher, "that, if anything, Love is being exposed to too much light. The subject is becoming vulgarised. Every

year a thousand problem plays and novels, poems and essays, tear the curtain from Love's Temple, drag it naked into the market-place for grinning crowds to gape at. In a million short stories, would-be comic, would-be serious, it is handled more or less coarsely, more or less unintelligently, gushed over, gibed and jeered at. Not a shred of self-respect is left to it. It is made the central figure of every farce, danced and sung round in every music-hall, yelled at by gallery, guffawed at by stalls. It is the stock-in-trade of every comic journal. Could any god, even a Mumbo Jumbo, so treated, hold its place among its votaries? Every term of endearment has become a catchword, every caress mocks us from the hoardings. Every tender speech we make recalls to us even while we are uttering it a hundred parodies. Every possible situation has been spoilt for us in advance by the American humorist."

"I have sat out a good many parodies of 'Hamlet,'" said the Minor Poet, "but the play still interests me. I remember a walking tour I once took in Bavaria. In some places the waysides are lined with crucifixes that are either comic or repulsive. There is a firm that turns them out by machinery. Yet, to the peasants who pass by, the Christ is still beautiful. You can belittle only what is already contemptible."

"Patriotism is a great virtue," replied the Philosopher: "the Jingoes have made it ridiculous."

"On the contrary," said the Minor Poet, "they have taught us to distinguish between the true and the false. So it is with love. The more it is cheapened, ridiculed, employed for market purposes, the less the inclination to affect it - to be in love with love, as Heine admitted he was, for its own sake."

"Is the necessity to love born in us," said the Girton Girl, "or do we practise to acquire it because it is the fashion - make up our mind to love, as boys learn to smoke, because every other fellow does it, and we do not like to be peculiar?"

"The majority of men and women," said the Minor Poet, "are incapable of love. With most it is a mere animal passion, with others a mild affection."

“We talk about love,” said the Philosopher, “as though it were a known quantity. After all, to say that a man loves is like saying that he paints or plays the violin; it conveys no meaning until we have witnessed his performance. Yet to hear the subject discussed, one might imagine the love of a Dante or a society Johnny, of a Cleopatra or a Georges Sand, to be precisely the same thing.”

“It was always poor Susan’s trouble,” said the Woman of the World; “she could never be persuaded that Jim really loved her. It was very sad, because I am sure he was devoted to her, in his way. But he could not do the sort of things she wanted him to do; she was so romantic. He did try. He used to go to all the poetical plays and study them. But he hadn’t the knack of it and he was naturally clumsy. He would rush into the room and fling himself on his knees before her, never noticing the dog, so that, instead of pouring out his heart as he had intended, he would have to start off with, ‘So awfully sorry! Hope I haven’t hurt the little beast?’ Which was enough to put anybody out.”

“Young girls are so foolish,” said the Old Maid; “they run after what glitters, and do not see the gold until it is too late. At first they are all eyes and no heart.”

“I knew a girl,” I said, “or, rather, a young married woman, who was cured of folly by the homoeopathic method. Her great trouble was that her husband had ceased to be her lover.”

“It seems to me so sad,” said the Old Maid. “Sometimes it is the woman’s fault, sometimes the man’s; more often both. The little courtesies, the fond words, the tender nothings that mean so much to those that love - it would cost so little not to forget them, and they would make life so much more beautiful.”

“There is a line of common sense running through all things,” I replied; “the secret of life consists in not diverging far from it on either side. He had been the most devoted wooer, never happy out of her eyes; but before they had been married a year she found to her astonishment that he could be content even away from her skirts, that he actually took pains to render himself agreeable to other women. He would spend whole afternoons at

his club, slip out for a walk occasionally by himself, shut himself up now and again in his study. It went so far that one day he expressed a distinct desire to leave her for a week and go a-fishing with some other men. She never complained - at least, not to him."

"That is where she was foolish," said the Girton Girl. "Silence in such cases is a mistake. The other party does not know what is the matter with you, and you yourself - your temper bottled up within - become more disagreeable every day."

"She confided her trouble to a friend," I explained.

"I so dislike people who do that," said the Woman of the World. "Emily never would speak to George; she would come and complain about him to me, as if I were responsible for him: I wasn't even his mother. When she had finished, George would come along, and I had to listen to the whole thing over again from his point of view. I got so tired of it at last that I determined to stop it."

"How did you succeed?" asked the Old Maid, who appeared to be interested in the recipe.

"I knew George was coming one afternoon," explained the Woman of the World, "so I persuaded Emily to wait in the conservatory. She thought I was going to give him good advice; instead of that I sympathised with him and encouraged him to speak his mind freely, which he did. It made her so mad that she came out and told him what she thought of him. I left them at it. They were both of them the better for it; and so was I."

"In my case," I said, "it came about differently. Her friend explained to him just what was happening. She pointed out to him how his neglect and indifference were slowly alienating his wife's affections from him. He argued the subject.

"'But a lover and a husband are not the same,' he contended; 'the situation is entirely different. You run after somebody you want to overtake; but when you have caught him up, you settle down quietly and walk beside

him; you don't continue shouting and waving your handkerchief after you have gained him.'

"Their mutual friend presented the problem differently."

"'You must hold what you have won,' she said, 'or it will slip away from you. By a certain course of conduct and behaviour you gained a sweet girl's regard; show yourself other than you were, how can you expect her to think the same of you?'

"'You mean,' he inquired, 'that I should talk and act as her husband exactly as I did when her lover?'

"'Precisely,' said the friend 'why not?'

"'It seems to me a mistake,' he grumbled.

"'Try it and see,' said the friend.

"'All right,' he said, 'I will.' And he went straight home and set to work."

"Was it too late," asked the Old Maid, "or did they come together again?"

"For the next mouth," I answered, "they were together twenty-four hours of the day. And then it was the wife who suggested, like the poet in Gilbert's *Patience*, the delight with which she would welcome an occasional afternoon off."

"He hung about her while she was dressing in the morning. Just as she had got her hair fixed he would kiss it passionately and it would come down again. All meal-time he would hold her hand under the table and insist on feeding her with a fork. Before marriage he had behaved once or twice in this sort of way at picnics; and after marriage, when at breakfast-time he had sat at the other end of the table reading the paper or his letters, she had reminded him of it reproachfully. The entire day he never left her side. She could never read a book; instead, he would read to her aloud, generally Browning' poems or translations from Goethe. Reading aloud was not an accomplishment of his, but in their courting days she had expressed

herself pleased at his attempts, and of this he took care, in his turn, to remind her. It was his idea that if the game were played at all, she should take a hand also. If he was to blither, it was only fair that she should bleat back. As he explained, for the future they would both be lovers all their life long; and no logical argument in reply could she think of. If she tried to write a letter, he would snatch away the paper her dear hands were pressing and fall to kissing it - and, of course, smearing it. When he wasn't giving her pins and needles by sitting on her feet he was balancing himself on the arm of her chair and occasionally falling over on top of her. If she went shopping, he went with her and made himself ridiculous at the dressmaker's. In society he took no notice of anybody but of her, and was hurt if she spoke to anybody but to him. Not that it was often, during that month, that they did see any society; most invitations he refused for them both, reminding her how once upon a time she had regarded an evening alone with him as an entertainment superior to all others. He called her ridiculous names, talked to her in baby language; while a dozen times a day it became necessary for her to take down her back hair and do it up afresh. At the end of a month, as I have said, it was she who suggested a slight cessation of affection."

"Had I been in her place," said the Girton Girl, "it would have been a separation I should have suggested. I should have hated him for the rest of my life."

"For merely trying to agree with you?" I said.

"For showing me I was a fool for ever having wanted his affection," replied the Girton Girl.

"You can generally," said the Philosopher, "make people ridiculous by taking them at their word."

"Especially women," murmured the Minor Poet.

"I wonder," said the Philosopher, "is there really so much difference between men and women as we think? What there is, may it not be the result of Civilisation rather than of Nature, of training rather than of instinct?"

“Deny the contest between male and female, and you deprive life of half its poetry,” urged the Minor Poet.

“Poetry,” returned the Philosopher, “was made for man, not man for poetry. I am inclined to think that the contest you speak of is somewhat in the nature of a ‘put-up job’ on the part of you poets. In the same way newspapers will always advocate war; it gives them something to write about, and is not altogether unconnected with sales. To test Nature’s original intentions, it is always safe to study our cousins the animals. There we see no sign of this fundamental variation; the difference is merely one of degree.”

“I quite agree with you,” said the Girton Girl. “Man, acquiring cunning, saw the advantage of using his one superiority, brute strength, to make woman his slave. In all other respects she is undoubtedly his superior.”

“In a woman’s argument,” I observed, “equality of the sexes invariably does mean the superiority of woman.”

“That is very curious,” added the Philosopher. “As you say, a woman never can be logical.”

“Are all men logical?” demanded the Girton Girl.

“As a class,” replied the Minor Poet, “yes.”

CHAPTER II

“What woman suffers from,” said the Philosopher, “is over-praise. It has turned her head.”

“You admit, then, that she has a head?” demanded the Girton Girl.

“It has always been a theory of mine,” returned the Philosopher, “that by Nature she was intended to possess one. It is her admirers who have always represented her as brainless.”

“Why is it that the brainy girl invariably has straight hair?” asked the Woman of the World.

“Because she doesn’t curl it,” explained the Girton Girl. She spoke somewhat snappishly, it seemed to me.

“I never thought of that,” murmured the Woman of the World.

“It is to be noted in connection with the argument,” I ventured to remark, “that we hear but little concerning the wives of intellectual men. When we do, as in the case of the Carlyles, it is to wish we did not.”

“When I was younger even than I am now,” said the Minor Poet, “I thought a good deal of marriage - very young men do. My wife, I told myself, must be a woman of mind. Yet, curiously, of all the women I have ever loved, no single one has been remarkable for intellect - present company, as usual, of course excepted.”

“Why is it,” sighed the Philosopher, “that in the most serious business of our life, marriage, serious considerations count for next to nothing? A dimpled chin can, and often does, secure for a girl the best of husbands;

while virtue and understanding combined cannot be relied upon to obtain her even one of the worst."

"I think the explanation is," replied the Minor Poet, "that as regards, let us say, the most natural business of our life, marriage, our natural instincts alone are brought into play. Marriage - clothe the naked fact in what flowers of rhetoric we will - has to do with the purely animal part of our being. The man is drawn towards it by his primeval desires; the woman by her inborn craving towards motherhood."

The thin, white hands of the Old Maid fluttered, troubled, where they lay upon her lap. "Why should we seek to explain away all the beautiful things of life?" she said. She spoke with a heat unusual to her. "The blushing lad, so timid, so devotional, worshipping as at the shrine of some mystic saint; the young girl moving spell-bound among dreams! They think of nothing but of one another."

"Tracing a mountain stream to its sombre source need not mar its music for us as it murmurs through the valley," expounded the Philosopher. "The hidden law of our being feeds each leaf of our life as sap runs through the tree. The transient blossom, the ripened fruit, is but its changing outward form."

"I hate going to the roots of things," said the Woman of the World. "Poor, dear papa was so fond of doing that. He would explain to us the genesis of oysters just when we were enjoying them. Poor mamma could never bring herself to touch them after that. While in the middle of dessert he would stop to argue with my Uncle Paul whether pig's blood or bullock's was the best for grape vines. I remember the year before Emily came out her favourite pony died; I have never known her so cut up about anything before or since. She asked papa if he would mind her having the poor creature buried in the garden. Her idea was that she would visit now and then its grave and weep awhile. Papa was awfully nice about it and stroked her hair. 'Certainly, my dear,' he said, 'we will have him laid to rest in the new strawberry bed.' Just then old Pardoe, the head gardener, came up to us and touched his hat. 'Well, I was just going to inquire of Miss Emily,' he said, 'if she wouldn't rather have the poor thing buried under one of the nectarine-trees. They ain't been doing very well of late.'

He said it was a pretty spot, and that he would put up a sort of stone. Poor Emily didn't seem to care much where the animal was buried by that time, so we left them arguing the question. I forget how it was settled; but I know we neither of us ate either strawberries or nectarines for the next two years."

"There is a time for everything," agreed the Philosopher. "With the lover, penning poetry to the wondrous red and white upon his mistress' cheek, we do not discuss the subject of pigment in the blood, its cause and probable duration. Nevertheless, the subject is interesting."

"We men and women," continued the Minor Poet, "we are Nature's favourites, her hope, for whom she has made sacrifice, putting aside so many of her own convictions, telling herself she is old-fashioned. She has let us go from her to the strange school where they laugh at all her notions. We have learnt new, strange ideas that bewilder the good dame. Yet, returning home it is curious to notice how little, in the few essential things of life, we differ from her other children, who have never wandered from her side. Our vocabulary has been extended and elaborated, yet face to face with the realities of existence it is unavailing. Clasping the living, standing beside the dead, our language still is but a cry. Our wants have grown more complicated; the ten-course banquet, with all that it involves, has substituted itself for the handful of fruits and nuts gathered without labour; the stalled ox and a world of trouble for the dinner of herbs and leisure therewith. Are we so far removed thereby above our little brother, who, having swallowed his simple, succulent worm, mounts a neighbouring twig and with easy digestion carols thanks to God? The square brick box about which we move, hampered at every step by wooden lumber, decked with many rags and strips of coloured paper, cumbered with odds and ends of melted flint and moulded clay, has replaced the cheap, convenient cave. We clothe ourselves in the skins of other animals instead of allowing our own to develop into a natural protection. We hang about us bits of stone and metal, but underneath it all we are little two-legged animals, struggling with the rest to live and breed. Beneath each hedgerow in the springtime we can read our own romances in the making - the first faint stirring of the blood, the roving eye, the sudden marvellous discovery of the indispensable She, the wooing, the denial, hope, coquetry,

despair, contention, rivalry, hate, jealousy, love, bitterness, victory, and death. Our comedies, our tragedies, are being played upon each blade of grass. In fur and feather we run epitomised."

"I know," said the Woman of the World; "I have heard it all so often. It is nonsense; I can prove it to you."

"That is easy," observed the Philosopher. "The Sermon on the Mount itself has been proved nonsense - among others, by a bishop. Nonsense is the reverse side of the pattern - the tangled ends of the thread that Wisdom weaves."

"There was a Miss Askew at the College," said the Girton Girl. "She agreed with every one. With Marx she was a Socialist, with Carlyle a believer in benevolent despotism, with Spinoza a materialist, with Newman a fanatic. I had a long talk with her before she left, and tried to understand her; she was an interesting girl. 'I think,' she said, 'I could choose among them if only they would answer one another. But they don't. They won't listen to one another. They only repeat their own case.'"

"There never is an answer," explained the Philosopher. "The kernel of every sincere opinion is truth. This life contains only the questions - the solutions to be published in a future issue."

"She was a curious sort of young woman," smiled the Girton Girl; "we used to laugh at her."

"I can quite believe it," commented the Philosopher.

"It is so like shopping," said the Old Maid.

"Like shopping!" exclaimed the Girton Girl.

The Old Maid blushed. "I was merely thinking," she said. "It sounds foolish. The idea occurred to me."

"You were thinking of the difficulty of choosing?" I suggested.

“Yes,” answered the Old Maid. “They will show you so many different things, one is quite unable - at least, I know it is so in my own case. I get quite angry with myself. It seems so weak-minded, but I cannot help it. This very dress I have on now - ”
“It is very charming,” said the Woman of the World, “in itself. I have been admiring it. Though I confess I think you look even better in dark colours.”

“You are quite right,” replied the Old Maid; “myself, I hate it. But you know how it is. I seemed to have been all the morning in the shop. I felt so tired. If only - ”

The Old Maid stopped abruptly. “I beg your pardon,” she said, “I am afraid I’ve interrupted.”

“I am so glad you told us,” said the Philosopher. “Do you know that seems to me an explanation?”

“Of what?” asked the Girton Girl.

“Of how so many of us choose our views,” returned the Philosopher; “we don’t like to come out of the shop without something.”

“But you were about to explain,” continued the Philosopher, turning to the Woman of the World, “ - to prove a point.”

“That I had been talking nonsense,” reminded her the Minor Poet; “if you are sure it will not weary you.”

“Not at all,” answered the Woman of the World; “it is quite simple. The gifts of civilisation cannot be the meaningless rubbish you advocates of barbarism would make out. I remember Uncle Paul’s bringing us home a young monkey he had caught in Africa. With the aid of a few logs we fitted up a sort of stage-tree for this little brother of mine, as I suppose you would call him, in the gun-room. It was an admirable imitation of the thing to which he and his ancestors must have been for thousands of years accustomed; and for the first two nights he slept perched among its branches. On the third the little brute turned the poor cat out of its basket

and slept on the eiderdown, after which no more tree for him, real or imitation. At the end of the three months, if we offered him monkey-nuts, he would snatch them from our hand and throw them at our head. He much preferred gingerbread and weak tea with plenty of sugar; and when we wanted him to leave the kitchen fire and enjoy a run in the garden, we had to carry him out swearing - I mean he was swearing, of course. I quite agree with him. I much prefer this chair on which I am sitting - this 'wooden lumber,' as you term it - to the most comfortable lump of old red sandstone that the best furnished cave could possibly afford; and I am degenerate enough to fancy that I look very nice in this frock - much nicer than my brothers or sisters to whom it originally belonged: they didn't know how to make the best of it."

"You would look charming anyhow," I murmured with conviction, "even - "

"I know what you are going to say," interrupted the Woman of the World; "please don't. It's very shocking, and, besides, I don't agree with you. I should have had a thick, coarse skin, with hair all over me and nothing by way of a change."

"I am contending," said the Minor Poet, "that what we choose to call civilisation has done little beyond pandering to our animal desires. Your argument confirms my theory. Your evidence in support of civilisation comes to this - that it can succeed in tickling the appetites of a monkey. You need not have gone back so far. The noble savage of today flings aside his clear spring water to snatch at the missionary's gin. He will even discard his feathers, which at least were picturesque, for a chimney-pot hat innocent of nap. Plaid trousers and cheap champagne follow in due course. Where is the advancement? Civilisation provides us with more luxuries for our bodies. That I grant you. Has it brought us any real improvement that could not have been arrived at sooner by other roads?"

"It has given us Art," said the Girton Girl.

"When you say 'us,'" replied the Minor Poet, "I presume you are referring to the one person in half a million to whom Art is anything more than a name. Dismissing the countless hordes who have absolutely never heard

the word, and confining attention to the few thousands scattered about Europe and America who prate of it, how many of even these do you think it really influences, entering into their lives, refining, broadening them? Watch the faces of the thin but conscientious crowd streaming wearily through our miles of picture galleries and art museums; gaping, with guide-book in hand, at ruined temple or cathedral tower; striving, with the spirit of the martyr, to feel enthusiasm for Old Masters at which, left to themselves, they would enjoy a good laugh - for chipped statues which, uninstructed, they would have mistaken for the damaged stock of a suburban tea-garden. Not more than one in twelve enjoys what he is looking at, and he by no means is bound to be the best of the dozen. Nero was a genuine lover of Art; and in modern times August the Strong, of Saxony, 'the man of sin,' as Carlyle calls him, has left undeniable proof behind him that he was a connoisseur of the first water. One recalls names even still more recent. Are we so sure that Art does elevate?"

"You are talking for the sake of talking," told him the Girton Girl.

"One can talk for the sake of thinking also," reminded her the Minor Poet. "The argument is one that has to be faced. But admitting that Art has been of service to mankind on the whole, that it possesses one-tenth of the soul-forming properties claimed for it in the advertisement - which I take to be a generous estimate - its effect upon the world at large still remains infinitesimal."

"It works down," maintained the Girton Girl. "From the few it spreads to the many."

"The process appears to be somewhat slow," answered the Minor Poet. "The result, for whatever it may be worth, we might have obtained sooner by doing away with the middleman."

"What middleman?" demanded the Girton Girl.

"The artist," explained the Minor Poet; "the man who has turned the whole thing into a business, the shopman who sells emotions over the counter. A Corot, a Turner is, after all, but a poor apology compared with a walk in spring through the Black Forest or the view from Hampstead Heath on a

November afternoon. Had we been less occupied acquiring 'the advantages of civilisation,' working upward through the weary centuries to the city slum, the corrugated-iron-roofed farm, we might have found time to learn to love the beauty of the world. As it is, we have been so busy 'civilising' ourselves that we have forgotten to live. We are like an old lady I once shared a carriage with across the Simplon Pass."

"By the way," I remarked, "one is going to be saved all that bother in the future. They have nearly completed the new railway line. One will be able to go from Domo d'Orsola to Brieg in a little over the two hours. They tell me the tunnelling is wonderful."

"It will be very charming," sighed the Minor Poet. "I am looking forward to a future when, thanks to 'civilisation,' travel will be done away with altogether. We shall be sewn up in a sack and shot there. At the time I speak of we still had to be content with the road winding through some of the most magnificent scenery in Switzerland. I rather enjoyed the drive myself, but my companion was quite unable to appreciate it. Not because she did not care for scenery. As she explained to me, she was passionately fond of it. But her luggage claimed all her attention. There were seventeen pieces of it altogether, and every time the ancient vehicle lurched or swayed, which on an average was once every thirty seconds, she was in terror lest one or more of them should be jerked out. Half her day was taken up in counting them and re-arranging them, and the only view in which she was interested was the cloud of dust behind us. One bonnet-box did contrive during the course of the journey to make its escape, after which she sat with her arms round as many of the remaining sixteen articles as she could encompass, and sighed."

"I knew an Italian countess," said the Woman of the World; "she had been at school with mamma. She never would go half a mile out of her way for scenery. 'Why should I?' she would say. 'What are the painters for? If there is anything good, let them bring it to me and I will look at it. She said she preferred the picture to the real thing, it was so much more artistic. In the landscape itself, she complained, there was sure to be a chimney in the distance, or a restaurant in the foreground, that spoilt the whole effect. The artist left it out. If necessary, he could put in a cow or a

pretty girl to help the thing. The actual cow, if it happened to be there at all, would probably be standing the wrong way round; the girl, in all likelihood, would be fat and plain, or be wearing the wrong hat. The artist knew precisely the sort of girl that ought to be there, and saw to it that she was there, with just the right sort of hat. She said she had found it so all through life - the poster was always an improvement on the play."

"It is rapidly coming to that," answered the Minor Poet. "Nature, as a well known painter once put it, is not 'creeping up' fast enough to keep pace with our ideals. In advanced Germany they improve the waterfalls and ornament the rocks. In Paris they paint the babies' faces."

"You can hardly lay the blame for that upon civilisation," pleaded the Girton Girl. "The ancient Briton had a pretty taste in woads."

"Man's first feeble steps upon the upward path of Art," assented the Minor Poet, "culminating in the rouge-pot and the hair-dye."

"Come!" laughed the Old Maid, "you are narrow-minded. Civilisation has given us music. Surely you will admit that has been of help to us?"

"My dear lady," replied the Minor Poet, "you speak of the one accomplishment with which Civilisation has had little or nothing to do, the one art that Nature has bestowed upon man in common with the birds and insects, the one intellectual enjoyment we share with the entire animal creation, excepting only the canines; and even the howling of the dog - one cannot be sure - may be an honest, however unsatisfactory, attempt towards a music of his own. I had a fox terrier once who invariably howled in tune. Jubal hampered, not helped us. He it was who stifled music with the curse of professionalism; so that now, like shivering shop-boys paying gate-money to watch games they cannot play, we sit mute in our stalls listening to the paid performer. But for the musician, music might have been universal. The human voice is still the finest instrument that we possess. We have allowed it to rust, the better to hear clever manipulators blow through tubes and twang wires. The musical world might have been a literal expression. Civilisation has contracted it to designate a coterie."

“By the way,” said the Woman of the World, “talking of music, have you heard that last symphony of Grieg’s? It came in the last parcel. I have been practising it.”

“Oh! do let us hear it,” urged the Old Maid. “I love Grieg.”

The Woman of the World rose and opened the piano.

“Myself, I have always been of opinion - ” I remarked.

“Please don’t chatter,” said the Minor Poet.

CHAPTER III

“I never liked her,” said the Old Maid; “I always knew she was heartless.”

“To my thinking,” said the Minor Poet, “she has shown herself a true woman.”

“Really,” said the Woman of the World, laughing, “I shall have to nickname you Dr. Johnson Redivivus. I believe, were the subject under discussion, you would admire the coiffure of the Furies. It would occur to you that it must have been naturally curly.”

“It is the Irish blood flowing in his veins,” I told them. “He must always be ‘agin the Government.’”

“We ought to be grateful to him,” remarked the Philosopher. “What can be more uninteresting than an agreeable conversation I mean, a conversation - where everybody is in agreement? Disagreement, on the other hand, is stimulating.”

“Maybe that is the reason,” I suggested, “why modern society is so tiresome an affair. By tabooing all difference of opinion we have eliminated all zest from our intercourse. Religion, sex, politics - any subject on which man really thinks, is scrupulously excluded from all polite gatherings. Conversation has become a chorus; or, as a writer wittily expressed it, the pursuit of the obvious to no conclusion. When not occupied with mumbling, ‘I quite agree with you’ - ‘As you say’ - ‘That is precisely my opinion’ - we sit about and ask each other riddles: ‘What did the Pro-Boer?’ ‘Why did Julius Caesar?’”

“Fashion has succeeded where Force for centuries has failed,” added the Philosopher. “One notices the tendency even in public affairs. It is bad

form nowadays to belong to the Opposition. The chief aim of the Church is to bring itself into line with worldly opinion. The Nonconformist Conscience grows every day a still smaller voice."

"I believe," said the Woman of the World, "that was the reason why Emily never got on with poor dear George. He agreed with her in everything. She used to say it made her feel such a fool."

"Man is a fighting animal," explained the Philosopher. "An officer who had been through the South African War was telling me only the other day: he was with a column, and news came in that a small commando was moving in the neighbourhood. The column set off in the highest of spirits, and after three days' trying work through a difficult country came up with, as they thought, the enemy. As a matter of fact, it was not the enemy, but a troop of Imperial Yeomanry that had lost its way. My friend informs me that the language with which his column greeted those unfortunate Yeomen - their fellow countrymen, men of their own blood - was most unsympathetic."

"Myself, I should hate a man who agreed with me," said the Girton Girl.

"My dear," replied the Woman of the World, "I don't think any would."

"Why not?" demanded the Girton Girl.

"I was thinking more of you, dear," replied the Woman of the World.

"I am glad you all concur with me," murmured the Minor Poet. "I have always myself regarded the Devil's Advocate as the most useful officer in the Court of Truth."

"I remember being present one evening," I observed, "at a dinner-party where an eminent judge met an equally eminent K. C.; whose client the judge that very afternoon had condemned to be hanged. 'It is always a satisfaction,' remarked to him genially the judge, 'condemning any prisoner defended by you. One feels so absolutely certain he was guilty.' The K. C. responded that he should always remember the judge's words with pride."

“Who was it,” asked the Philosopher, “who said: ‘Before you can attack a lie, you must strip it of its truth’?”

“It sounds like Emerson,” I ventured.

“Very possibly,” assented the Philosopher; “very possibly not. There is much in reputation. Most poetry gets attributed to Shakespeare.”

“I entered a certain drawing-room about a week ago,” I said. “‘We were just speaking about you,’ exclaimed my hostess. ‘Is not this yours?’ She pointed to an article in a certain magazine lying open on the table. ‘No,’ I replied; ‘one or two people have asked me that same question. It seems to me rather an absurd article,’ I added. ‘I cannot say I thought very much of it,’ agreed my hostess.”

“I can’t help it,” said the Old Maid. “I shall always dislike a girl who deliberately sells herself for money.”

“But what else is there to sell herself for?” asked the Minor Poet.

“She should not sell herself at all,” retorted the Old Maid, with warmth. “She should give herself, for love.”

“Are we not in danger of drifting into a difference of opinion concerning the meaning of words merely?” replied the Minor Poet. “We have all of us, I suppose, heard the story of the Jew clothier remonstrated with by the Rabbi for doing business on the Sabbath. ‘Doing bithness!’ retorted the accused with indignation; ‘you call thelling a thuit like that for eighteen shillings doing bithness! By, ith’s tharity!’ This ‘love’ for which the maiden gives herself - let us be a little more exact - does it not include, as a matter of course, material more tangible? Would not the adored one look somewhat astonished on discovering that, having given herself for ‘love,’ love was all that her lover proposed to give for her. Would she not naturally exclaim: ‘But where’s the house, to say nothing of the fittings? And what are we to live on’?”

“It is you now who are playing with words,” asserted the Old Maid. “The greater includes the less. Loving her, he would naturally desire - ”

“With all his worldly goods her to endow,” completed for her the Minor Poet. “In other words, he pays a price for her. So far as love is concerned, they are quits. In marriage, the man gives himself to the woman as the woman gives herself to the man. Man has claimed, I am aware, greater liberty for himself; but the claim has always been vehemently repudiated by woman. She has won her case. Legally and morally now husband and wife are bound by the same laws. This being so, her contention that she gives herself falls to the ground. She exchanges herself. Over and above, she alone of the twain claims a price.”

“Say a living wage,” corrected the Philosopher. “Lazy rubbish lolls in petticoats, and idle stupidity struts in trousers. But, class for class, woman does her share of the world’s work. Among the poor, of the two it is she who labours the longer. There is a many-versed ballad popular in country districts. Often I have heard it sung in shrill, piping voice at harvest supper or barn dance. The chorus runs -

A man’s work ’tis till set of sun,
But a woman’s work is never done!

“My housekeeper came to me a few months ago,” said the Woman of the World, “to tell me that my cook had given notice. ‘I am sorry to hear it,’ I answered; ‘has she found a better place?’ ‘I am not so sure about that,’ answered Markham; ‘she’s going as general servant.’ ‘As general servant!’ I exclaimed. ‘To old Hudson, at the coal wharf,’ answered Markham. ‘His wife died last year, if you remember. He’s got seven children, poor man, and no one to look after them.’ ‘I suppose you mean,’ I said, ‘that she’s marrying him.’ ‘Well, that’s the way she puts it,’ laughed Markham. ‘What I tell her is, she’s giving up a good home and fifty pounds a year, to be a general servant on nothing a week. But they never see it.’”

“I recollect her,” answered the Minor Poet, “a somewhat depressing lady. Let me take another case. You possess a remarkably pretty housemaid -

Edith, if I have it rightly."

"I have noticed her," remarked the Philosopher. "Her manners strike me as really quite exceptional."

"I never could stand any one about me with carroty hair," remarked the Girton Girl.

"I should hardly call it carroty," contended the Philosopher. "There is a golden tint of much richness underlying, when you look closely."

"She is a very good girl," agreed the Woman of the World; "but I am afraid I shall have to get rid of her. The other woman servants don't get on with her."

"Do you know whether she is engaged or not?" demanded the Minor Poet.

"At the present moment," answered the Woman of the World, "she is walking out, I believe, with the eldest son of the 'Blue Lion.' But she is never adverse to a change. If you are really in earnest about the matter - "

"I was not thinking of myself," said the Minor Poet. "But suppose some young gentleman of personal attractions equal to those of the 'Blue Lion,' or even not quite equal, possessed of two or three thousand a year, were to enter the lists, do you think the 'Blue Lion' would stand much chance?"

"Among the Upper Classes," continued the Minor Poet, "opportunity for observing female instinct hardly exists. The girl's choice is confined to lovers able to pay the price demanded, if not by the beloved herself, by those acting on her behalf. But would a daughter of the Working Classes ever hesitate, other things being equal, between Mayfair and Seven Dials?"

"Let me ask you one," chimed in the Girton Girl. "Would a bricklayer hesitate any longer between a duchess and a scullery-maid?"

"But duchesses don't fall in love with bricklayers," returned the Minor Poet. "Now, why not? The stockbroker flirts with the barmaid - cases

have been known; often he marries her. Does the lady out shopping ever fall in love with the waiter at the bun-shop? Hardly ever. Lordlings marry ballet girls, but ladies rarely put their heart and fortune at the feet of the Lion Comique. Manly beauty and virtue are not confined to the House of Lords and its dependencies. How do you account for the fact that while it is common enough for the man to look beneath him, the woman will almost invariably prefer her social superior, and certainly never tolerate her inferior? Why should King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid appear to us a beautiful legend, while Queen Cophetua and the Tramp would be ridiculous?"

"The simple explanation is," expounded the Girton Girl, "woman is so immeasurably man's superior that only by weighting him more or less heavily with worldly advantages can any semblance of balance be obtained."

"Then," answered the Minor Poet, "you surely agree with me that woman is justified in demanding this 'make-weight.' The woman gives her love, if you will. It is the art treasure, the gilded vase thrown in with the pound of tea; but the tea has to be paid for."

"It all sounds very clever," commented the Old Maid; "yet I fail to see what good comes of ridiculing a thing one's heart tells one is sacred."

"Do not be so sure I am wishful to ridicule," answered the Minor Poet. "Love is a wondrous statue God carved with His own hands and placed in the Garden of Life, long ago. And man, knowing not sin, worshipped her, seeing her beautiful. Till the time came when man learnt evil; then saw that the statue was naked, and was ashamed of it. Since when he has been busy, draping it, now in the fashion of this age, now in the fashion of that. We have shod her in dainty bottines, regretting the size of her feet. We employ the best artistes to design for her cunning robes that shall disguise her shape. Each season we fix fresh millinery upon her changeless head. We hang around her robes of woven words. Only the promise of her ample breasts we cannot altogether hide, shocking us not a little; only that remains to tell us that beneath the tawdry tissues still stands the changeless statue God carved with His own hands."

“I like you better when you talk like that,” said the Old Maid; “but I never feel quite sure of you. All I mean, of course, is that money should not be her first consideration. Marriage for money - it is not marriage; one cannot speak of it. Of course, one must be reasonable.”

“You mean,” persisted the Minor Poet, “you would have her think also of her dinner, of her clothes, her necessities, luxuries.”

“It is not only for herself,” answered the Old Maid.

“For whom?” demanded the Minor Poet.

The white hands of the Old Maid fluttered on her lap, revealing her trouble; for of the old school is this sweet friend of mine.

“There are the children to be considered,” I explained. “A woman feels it even without knowing. It is her instinct.”

The Old Maid smiled on me her thanks.

“It is where I was leading,” said the Minor Poet. “Woman has been appointed by Nature the trustee of the children. It is her duty to think of them, to plan for them. If in marriage she does not take the future into consideration, she is untrue to her trust.”

“Before you go further,” interrupted the Philosopher, “there is an important point to be considered. Are children better or worse for a pampered upbringing? Is not poverty often the best school?”

“It is what I always tell George,” remarked the Woman of the World, “when he grumbles at the tradesmen’s books. If Papa could only have seen his way to being a poor man, I feel I should have been a better wife.”

“Please don’t suggest the possibility,” I begged the Woman of the World; “the thought is too bewildering.”

“You were never imaginative,” replied the Woman of the World.

“Not to that extent,” I admitted.

“‘The best mothers make the worst children,’” quoted the Girton Girl. “I intend to bear that in mind.”

“Your mother was a very beautiful character - one of the most beautiful I ever knew,” remarked the Old Maid.

“There is some truth in the saying,” agreed the Minor Poet, “but only because it is the exception; and Nature invariably puts forth all her powers to counteract the result of deviation from her laws. Were it the rule, then the bad mother would be the good mother and the good mother the bad mother. And - ”

“Please don’t go on,” said the Woman of the World. “I was up late last night.”

“I was merely going to show,” explained the Minor Poet, “that all roads lead to the law that the good mother is the best mother. Her duty is to her children, to guard their infancy, to take thought for their equipment.”

“Do you seriously ask us to believe,” demanded the Old Maid, “that the type of woman who does marry for money considers for a single moment any human being but herself?”

“Not consciously, perhaps,” admitted the Minor Poet. “Our instincts, that they may guide us easily, are purposely made selfish. The flower secretes honey for its own purposes, not with any sense of charity towards the bee. Man works, as he thinks, for beer and baccy; in reality, for the benefit of unborn generations. The woman, in acting selfishly, is assisting Nature’s plans. In olden days she chose her mate for his strength. She, possibly enough, thought only of herself; he could best provide for her then simple wants, best guard her from the disagreeable accidents of nomadic life. But Nature, unseen, directing her, was thinking of the savage brood needing still more a bold protector. Wealth now is the substitute for strength. The rich man is the strong man. The woman’s heart unconsciously goes out to him.”

“Do men never marry for money?” inquired the Girton Girl. “I ask merely for information. Maybe I have been misinformed, but I have heard of

countries where the *dot* is considered of almost more importance than the bride."

"The German officer," I ventured to strike in, "is literally on sale. Young lieutenants are most expensive, and even an elderly colonel costs a girl a hundred thousand marks."

"You mean," corrected the Minor Poet, "costs her father. The Continental husband demands a dowry with his wife, and sees that he gets it. He in his turn has to save and scrape for years to provide each of his daughters with the necessary *dot*. It comes to the same thing precisely. Your argument could only apply were woman equally with man a wealth producer. As it is, a woman's wealth is invariably the result of a marriage, either her own or that of some shrewd ancestress. And as regards the heiress, the principle of sale and purchase, if I may be forgiven the employment of common terms, is still more religiously enforced. It is not often that the heiress is given away; stolen she may be occasionally, much to the indignation of Lord Chancellors and other guardians of such property; the thief is very properly punished - imprisoned, if need be. If handed over legitimately, her price is strictly exacted, not always in money - that she possesses herself, maybe in sufficiency; it enables her to bargain for other advantages no less serviceable to her children - for title, place, position. In the same way the Neolithic woman, herself of exceptional strength and ferocity, may have been enabled to bestow a thought upon her savage lover's beauty, his prehistoric charm of manner; thus in other directions no less necessary assisting the development of the race."

"I cannot argue with you," said the Old Maid. "I know one case. They were both poor; it would have made no difference to her, but it did to him. Maybe I am wrong, but it seems to me that, as you say, our instincts are given us to guide us. I do not know. The future is not in our hands; it does not belong to us. Perhaps it were wiser to listen to the voices that are sent to us."

"I remember a case, also," said the Woman of the World. She had risen to prepare the tea, and was standing with her back to us. "Like the woman you speak of, she was poor, but one of the sweetest creatures I have ever

known. I cannot help thinking it would have been good for the world had she been a mother."

"My dear lady," cried the Minor Poet, "you help me!"

"I always do, according to you," laughed the Woman of the World. "I appear to resemble the bull that tossed the small boy high into the apple-tree he had been trying all the afternoon to climb."

"It is very kind of you," answered the Minor Poet. "My argument is that woman is justified in regarding marriage as the end of her existence, the particular man as but a means. The woman you speak of acted selfishly, rejecting the crown of womanhood because not tendered to her by hands she had chosen."

"You would have us marry without love?" asked the Girton Girl.

"With love, if possible," answered the Minor Poet; "without, rather than not at all. It is the fulfilment of the woman's law."

"You would make of us goods and chattels," cried the Girton Girl.

"I would make of you what you are," returned the Minor Poet, "the priestesses of Nature's temple, leading man to the worship of her mysteries. An American humorist has described marriage as the craving of some young man to pay for some young woman's board and lodging. There is no escaping from this definition; let us accept it. It is beautiful - so far as the young man is concerned. He sacrifices himself, deprives himself, that he may give. That is love. But from the woman's point of view? If she accept thinking only of herself, then it is a sordid bargain on her part. To understand her, to be just to her, we must look deeper. Not sexual, but maternal love is her kingdom. She gives herself not to her lover, but through her lover to the great Goddess of the Myriad Breasts that shadows ever with her guardian wings Life from the outstretched hand of Death."

"She may be a nice enough girl from Nature's point of view," said the Old Maid; "personally, I shall never like her."

CHAPTER IV

“What is the time?” asked the Girton Girl.

I looked at my watch. “Twenty past four,” I answered.

“Exactly?” demanded the Girton Girl.

“Precisely,” I replied.

“Strange,” murmured the Girton Girl. “There is no accounting for it, yet it always is so.”

“What is there no accounting for?” I inquired. “What is strange?”

“It is a German superstition,” explained the Girton Girl, “I learnt it at school. Whenever complete silence falls upon any company, it is always twenty minutes past the hour.”

“Why do we talk so much?” demanded the Minor Poet.

“As a matter of fact,” observed the Woman of the World, “I don’t think we do - not we, personally, not much. Most of our time we appear to be listening to you.”

“Then why do I talk so much, if you prefer to put it that way?” continued the Minor Poet. “If I talked less, one of you others would have to talk more.”

“There would be that advantage about it,” agreed the Philosopher.

“In all probability, you,” returned to him the Minor Poet. “Whether as a happy party we should gain or lose by the exchange, it is not for me to say,

though I have my own opinion. The essential remains - that the stream of chatter must be kept perpetually flowing. Why?"

"There is a man I know," I said; "you may have met him, a man named Longrush. He is not exactly a bore. A bore expects you to listen to him. This man is apparently unaware whether you are listening to him or not. He is not a fool. A fool is occasionally amusing - Longrush never. No subject comes amiss to him. Whatever the topic, he has something uninteresting to say about it. He talks as a piano-organ grinds out music steadily, strenuously, tirelessly. The moment you stand or sit him down he begins, to continue ceaselessly till wheeled away in cab or omnibus to his next halting-place. As in the case of his prototype, his rollers are changed about once a month to suit the popular taste. In January he repeats to you Dan Leno's jokes, and gives you other people's opinions concerning the Old Masters at the Guild-hall. In June he recounts at length what is generally thought concerning the Academy, and agrees with most people on most points connected with the Opera. If forgetful for a moment - as an Englishman may be excused for being - whether it be summer or winter, one may assure oneself by waiting to see whether Longrush is enthusing over cricket or football. He is always up-to-date. The last new Shakespeare, the latest scandal, the man of the hour, the next nine days' wonder - by the evening Longrush has his roller ready. In my early days of journalism I had to write each evening a column for a provincial daily, headed 'What People are Saying.' The editor was precise in his instructions. 'I don't want your opinions; I don't want you to be funny; never mind whether the thing appears to you to be interesting or not. I want it to be real, the things people *are* saying.' I tried to be conscientious. Each paragraph began with 'That.' I wrote the column because I wanted the thirty shillings. Why anybody ever read it, I fail to understand to this day; but I believe it was one of the popular features of the paper. Longrush invariably brings back to my mind the dreary hours I spent penning that fatuous record."

"I think I know the man you mean," said the Philosopher. "I had forgotten his name."

“I thought it possible you might have met him,” I replied. “Well, my cousin Edith was arranging a dinner-party the other day, and, as usual, she did me the honour to ask my advice. Generally speaking, I do not give advice nowadays. As a very young man I was generous with it. I have since come to the conclusion that responsibility for my own muddles and mistakes is sufficient. However, I make an exception in Edith’s case, knowing that never by any chance will she follow it.”

“Speaking of editors,” said the Philosopher, “Bates told me at the club the other night that he had given up writing the ‘Answers to Correspondents’ personally, since discovery of the fact that he had been discussing at some length the attractive topic, ‘Duties of a Father,’ with his own wife, who is somewhat of a humorist.”

“There was the wife of a clergyman my mother used to tell of,” said the Woman of the World, “who kept copies of her husband’s sermons. She would read him extracts from them in bed, in place of curtain lectures. She explained it saved her trouble. Everything she felt she wanted to say to him he had said himself so much more forcibly.”

“The argument always appears to me weak,” said the Philosopher. “If only the perfect may preach, our pulpits would remain empty. Am I to ignore the peace that slips into my soul when perusing the Psalms, to deny myself all benefit from the wisdom of the Proverbs, because neither David nor Solomon was a worthy casket of the jewels that God had placed in them? Is a temperance lecturer never to quote the self-reproaches of poor Cassio because Master Will Shakespeare, there is evidence to prove, was a gentleman, alas! much too fond of the bottle? The man that beats the drum may be himself a coward. It is the drum that is the important thing to us, not the drummer.”

“Of all my friends,” said the Woman of the World, “the one who has the most trouble with her servants is poor Jane Meredith.”

“I am exceedingly sorry to hear it,” observed the Philosopher, after a slight pause. “But forgive me, I really do not see - ”

“I beg your pardon,” answered the Woman of the World. “I thought everybody knew ‘Jane Meredith.’ She writes ‘The Perfect Home’ column for *The Woman’s World*.”

“It will always remain a riddle, one supposes,” said the Minor Poet. “Which is the real ego - I, the author of ‘The Simple Life,’ fourteenth edition, three and sixpence net - ”

“Don’t,” pleaded the Old Maid, with a smile; “please don’t.”

“Don’t what?” demanded the Minor Poet.

“Don’t ridicule it - make fun of it, even though it may happen to be your own. There are parts of it I know by heart. I say them over to myself when - Don’t spoil it for me.” The Old Maid laughed, but nervously.

“My dear lady,” reassured her the Minor Poet, “do not be afraid. No one regards that poem with more reverence than do I. You can have but small conception what a help it is to me also. I, too, so often read it to myself; and when - We understand. As one who turns his back on scenes of riot to drink the moonlight in quiet ways, I go to it for sweetness and for peace. So much do I admire the poem, I naturally feel desire and curiosity to meet its author, to know him. I should delight, drawing him aside from the crowded room, to grasp him by the hand, to say to him: ‘My dear - my very dear Mr. Minor Poet, I am so glad to meet you! I would I could tell you how much your beautiful work has helped me. This, my dear sir - this is indeed privilege!’ But I can picture so vividly the bored look with which he would receive my gush. I can imagine the contempt with which he, the pure liver, would regard me did he know me - me, the liver of the fool’s hot days.”

“A short French story I once read somewhere,” I said, “rather impressed me. A poet or dramatist - I am not sure which - had married the daughter of a provincial notary. There was nothing particularly attractive about her except her *dot*. He had run through his own small fortune and was in some need. She worshipped him and was, as he used to boast to his friends, the ideal wife for a poet. She cooked admirably - a useful accomplishment during the first half-dozen years of their married life; and afterwards,

when fortune came to him, managed his affairs to perfection, by her care and economy keeping all worldly troubles away from his study door. An ideal *Hausfrau*, undoubtedly, but of course no companion for our poet. So they went their ways; till, choosing as in all things the right moment, when she could best be spared, the good lady died and was buried.

"And here begins the interest of the story, somewhat late. One article of furniture, curiously out of place among the rich appointments of their fine *hôtel*, the woman had insisted on retaining, a heavy, clumsily carved oak desk her father had once used in his office, and which he had given to her for her own as a birthday present back in the days of her teens.

"You must read the story for yourselves if you would enjoy the subtle sadness that surrounds it, the delicate aroma of regret through which it moves. The husband finding after some little difficulty the right key, fits it into the lock of the bureau. As a piece of furniture, plain, solid, squat, it has always jarred upon his artistic sense. She too, his good, affectionate Sara, had been plain, solid, a trifle squat. Perhaps that was why the poor woman had clung so obstinately to the one thing in the otherwise perfect house that was quite out of place there. Ah, well! she is gone now, the good creature. And the bureau - no, the bureau shall remain. Nobody will need to come into this room, no one ever did come there but the woman herself. Perhaps she had not been altogether so happy as she might have been. A husband less intellectual - one from whom she would not have lived so far apart - one who could have entered into her simple, commonplace life! it might have been better for both of them. He draws down the lid, pulls out the largest drawer. It is full of manuscripts, folded and tied neatly with ribbons once gay, now faded. He thinks at first they are his own writings - things begun and discarded, reserved by her with fondness. She thought so much of him, the good soul! Really, she could not have been so dull as he had deemed her. The power to appreciate rightly - this, at least, she must have possessed. He unties the ribbon. No, the writing is her own, corrected, altered, underlined. He opens a second, a third. Then with a smile he sits down to read. What can they be like, these poems, these stories? He laughs, smoothing the crumpled paper, foreseeing the trite commonness, the shallow sentiment. The poor child!

So she likewise would have been a *littérateure*. Even she had her ambition, her dream.

"The sunshine climbs the wall behind him, creeps stealthily across the ceiling of the room, slips out softly by the window, leaving him alone. All these years he had been living with a fellow poet. They should have been comrades, and they had never spoken. Why had she hidden herself? Why had she left him, never revealing herself? Years ago, when they were first married - he remembers now - she had slipped little blue-bound copy-books into his pocket, laughing, blushing, asking him to read them. How could he have guessed? Of course, he had forgotten them. Later, they had disappeared again; it had never occurred to him to think. Often in the earlier days she had tried to talk to him about his work. Had he but looked into her eyes, he might have understood. But she had always been so homely-seeming, so good. Who would have suspected? Then suddenly the blood rushes into his face. What must have been her opinion of his work? All these years he had imagined her the amazed devotee, uncomprehending but admiring. He had read to her at times, comparing himself the while with Molière reading to his cook. What right had she to play this trick upon him? The folly of it! The pity of it! He would have been so glad of her."

"What becomes, I wonder," mused the Philosopher, "of the thoughts that are never spoken? We know that in Nature nothing is wasted; the very cabbage is immortal, living again in altered form. A thought published or spoken we can trace, but such must only be a small percentage. It often occurs to me walking down the street. Each man and woman that I pass by, each silently spinning his silken thought, short or long, fine or coarse. What becomes of it?"

"I heard you say once," remarked the Old Maid to the Minor Poet, "that 'thoughts are in the air,' that the poet but gathers them as a child plucks wayside blossoms to shape them into nosegays."

"It was in confidence," replied the Minor Poet. "Please do not let it get about, or my publisher will use it as an argument for cutting down my royalties."

“I have always remembered it,” answered the Old Maid. “It seemed so true. A thought suddenly comes to you. I think of them sometimes, as of little motherless babes creeping into our brains for shelter.”

“It is a pretty idea,” mused the Minor Poet. “I shall see them in the twilight: pathetic little round-eyed things of goblin shape, dimly luminous against the darkening air. Whence come you, little tender Thought, tapping at my brain? From the lonely forest, where the peasant mother croons above the cradle while she knits? Thought of Love and Longing: lies your gallant father with his boyish eyes unblinking underneath some tropic sun? Thought of Life and Thought of Death: are you of patrician birth, cradled by some high-born maiden, pacing slowly some sweet garden? Or did you spring to life amid the din of loom or factory? Poor little nameless foundlings! I shall feel myself in future quite a philanthropist, taking them in, adopting them.”

“You have not yet decided,” reminded him the Woman of the World, “which you really are: the gentleman we get for three and sixpence net, or the one we are familiar with, the one we get for nothing.”

“Please don’t think I am suggesting any comparison,” continued the Woman of the World, “but I have been interested in the question since George joined a Bohemian club and has taken to bringing down minor celebrities from Saturday to Monday. I hope I am not narrow-minded, but there is one gentleman I have been compelled to put my foot down on.”

“I really do not think he will complain,” I interrupted. The Woman of the World possesses, I should explain, the daintiest of feet.

“It is heavier than you think,” replied the Woman of the World. “George persists I ought to put up with him because he is a true poet. I cannot admit the argument. The poet I honestly admire. I like to have him about the place. He lies on my drawing-room table in white vellum, and helps to give tone to the room. For the poet I am quite prepared to pay the four-and-six demanded; the man I don’t want. To be candid, he is not worth his own discount.”

“It is hardly fair,” urged the Minor Poet, “to confine the discussion to poets. A friend of mine some years ago married one of the most charming women in New York, and that is saying a good deal. Everybody congratulated him, and at the outset he was pleased enough with himself. I met him two years later in Geneva, and we travelled together as far as Rome. He and his wife scarcely spoke to one another the whole journey, and before I left him he was good enough to give me advice which to another man might be useful. ‘Never marry a charming woman,’ he counselled me. ‘Anything more unutterably dull than “the charming woman” outside business hours you cannot conceive.’”

“I think we must agree to regard the preacher,” concluded the Philosopher, “merely as a brother artist. The singer may be a heavy, fleshy man with a taste for beer, but his voice stirs our souls. The preacher holds aloft his banner of purity. He waves it over his own head as much as over the heads of those around him. He does not cry with the Master, ‘Come to Me,’ but ‘Come with me, and be saved.’ The prayer ‘Forgive them’ was the prayer not of the Priest, but of the God. The prayer dictated to the Disciples was ‘Forgive us,’ ‘Deliver us.’ Not that he should be braver, not that he should be stronger than they that press behind him, is needed of the leader, but that he should know the way. He, too, may faint, he, too, may fall; only he alone must never turn his back.”

“It is quite comprehensible, looked at from one point of view,” remarked the Minor Poet, “that he who gives most to others should himself be weak. The professional athlete pays, I believe, the price of central weakness. It is a theory of mine that the charming, delightful people one meets with in society are people who have dishonestly kept to themselves gifts entrusted to them by Nature for the benefit of the whole community. Your conscientious, hard-working humorist is in private life a dull dog. The dishonest trustee of laughter, on the other hand, robbing the world of wit bestowed upon him for public purposes, becomes a brilliant conversationalist.”

“But,” added the Minor Poet, turning to me, “you were speaking of a man named Longrush, a great talker.”

“A long talker,” I corrected. “My cousin mentioned him third in her list of invitations. ‘Longrush,’ she said with conviction, ‘we must have Longrush.’ ‘Isn’t he rather tiresome?’ I suggested. ‘He is tiresome,’ she agreed, ‘but then he’s so useful. He never lets the conversation drop.’”

“Why is it?” asked the Minor Poet. “Why, when we meet together, must we chatter like a mob of sparrows? Why must every assembly to be successful sound like the parrot-house of a zoological garden?”

“I remember a parrot story,” I said, “but I forget who told it to me.”

“Maybe one of us will remember as you go on,” suggested the Philosopher.

“A man,” I said - “an old farmer, if I remember rightly - had read a lot of parrot stories, or had heard them at the club. As a result he thought he would like himself to be the owner of a parrot, so journeyed to a dealer and, according to his own account, paid rather a long price for a choice specimen. A week later he re-entered the shop, the parrot borne behind him by a boy. ‘This bird,’ said the farmer, ‘this bird you sold me last week ain’t worth a sovereign!’ ‘What’s the matter with it?’ demanded the dealer. ‘How do I know what’s the matter with the bird?’ answered the farmer. ‘What I tell you is that it ain’t worth a sovereign - ‘tain’ t worth a half a sovereign!’ ‘Why not?’ persisted the dealer; ‘it talks all right, don’t it?’ ‘Talks!’ retorted the indignant farmer, ‘the damn thing talks all day, but it never says anything funny!’”

“A friend of mine,” said the Philosopher, “once had a parrot - ”

“Won’t you come into the garden?” said the Woman of the World, rising and leading the way.

CHAPTER V

“Myself,” said the Minor Poet, “I read the book with the most intense enjoyment. I found it inspiring - so inspiring, I fear I did not give it sufficient attention. I must read it again.”

“I understand you,” said the Philosopher. “A book that really interests us makes us forget that we are reading. Just as the most delightful conversation is when nobody in particular appears to be talking.”

“Do you remember meeting that Russian man George brought down here about three months ago?” asked the Woman of the World, turning to the Minor Poet. “I forget his name. As a matter of fact, I never knew it. It was quite unpronounceable and, except that it ended, of course, with a double f, equally impossible to spell. I told him frankly at the beginning I should call him by his Christian name, which fortunately was Nicholas. He was very nice about it.”

“I remember him distinctly,” said the Minor Poet. “A charming man.”

“He was equally charmed with you,” replied the Woman of the World.

“I can credit it easily,” murmured the Minor Poet. “One of the most intelligent men I ever met.”

“You talked together for two hours in a corner,” said the Woman of the World. “I asked him when you had gone what he thought of you. ‘Ah! what a talker!’ he exclaimed, making a gesture of admiration with his hands. ‘I thought maybe you would notice it,’ I answered him. ‘Tell me, what did he talk about?’ I was curious to know; you had been so absorbed in yourselves and so oblivious to the rest of us. ‘Upon my word,’ he replied, ‘I really cannot tell you. Do you know, I am afraid, now I come to

think of it, that I must have monopolised the conversation.' I was glad to be able to ease his mind on that point. 'I really don't think you did,' I assured him. I should have felt equally confident had I not been present."

"You were quite correct," returned the Minor Poet. "I have a distinct recollection of having made one or two observations myself. Indeed, if I may say so, I talked rather well."

"You may also recollect," continued the Woman of the World, "that the next time we met I asked you what he had said, and that your mind was equally a blank on the subject. You admitted you had found him interesting. I was puzzled at the time, but now I begin to understand. Both of you, no doubt, found the conversation so brilliant, each of you felt it must have been your own."

"A good book," I added - "a good talk is like a good dinner: one assimilates it. The best dinner is the dinner you do not know you have eaten."

"A thing will often suggest interesting thought," observed the Old Maid, "without being interesting. Often I find the tears coming into my eyes as I witness some stupid melodrama - something said, something hinted at, will stir a memory, start a train of thought."

"I once," I said, "sat next to a country-man in the pit of a music-hall some years ago. He enjoyed himself thoroughly up to half-past ten. Songs about mothers-in-law, drunken wives, and wooden legs he roared at heartily. At ten-thirty entered a well-known *artiste* who was then giving a series of what he called 'Condensed Tragedies in Verse.' At the first two my country friend chuckled hugely. The third ran: 'Little boy; pair of skates: broken ice; heaven's gates.' My friend turned white, rose hurriedly, and pushed his way impatiently out of the house. I left myself some ten minutes later, and by chance ran against him again in the bar of the 'Criterion,' where he was drinking whisky rather copiously. 'I couldn't stand that fool,' he explained to me in a husky voice. 'Truth is, my youngest kid got drowned last winter skating. Don't see any sense making fun of real trouble.'"

“I can cap your story with another,” said the Philosopher. “Jim sent me a couple of seats for one of his first nights a month or two ago. They did not reach me till four o’clock in the afternoon. I went down to the club to see if I could pick up anybody. The only man there I knew at all was a rather quiet young fellow, a new member. He had just taken Bates’s chambers in Staple Inn - you have met him, I think. He didn’t know many people then and was grateful for my invitation. The play was one of those Palais Royal farces - it cannot matter which, they are all exactly alike. The fun consists of somebody’s trying to sin without being found out. It always goes well. The British public invariably welcomes the theme, provided it be dealt with in a merry fashion. It is only the serious discussion of evil that shocks us. There was the usual banging of doors and the usual screaming. Everybody was laughing around us. My young friend sat with rather a curious fixed smile upon his face. ‘Fairly well constructed,’ I said to him, as the second curtain fell amid yells of delight. ‘Yes,’ he answered, ‘I suppose it’s very funny.’ I looked at him; he was little more than a boy. ‘You are rather young,’ I said, ‘to be a moralist.’ He gave a short laugh. ‘Oh! I shall grow out of it in time,’ he said. He told me his story later, when I came to know him better. He had played the farce himself over in Melbourne - he was an Australian. Only the third act had ended differently. His girl wife, of whom he was passionately fond, had taken it quite seriously and had committed suicide. A foolish thing to do.”

“Man is a beast!” said the Girton Girl, who was prone to strong expression.

“I thought so myself when I was younger,” said the Woman of the World.

“And don’t you now, when you hear a thing like that?” suggested the Girton Girl.

“Certainly, my dear,” replied the Woman of the World; “there is a deal of the animal in man; but - well, I was myself expressing that same particular view of him, the brute, to a very old lady with whom I was spending a winter in Brussels, many years ago now, when I was quite a girl. She had been a friend of my father’s, and was one of the sweetest and kindest - I was almost going to say the most perfect woman I have ever met; though as a celebrated beauty, stories, dating from the early Victorian era, were

told about her. But myself I never believed them. Her calm, gentle, passionless face, crowned with its soft, silver hair - I remember my first sight of the Matterhorn on a summer's evening; somehow it at once reminded me of her."

"My dear," laughed the Old Maid, "your anecdotal method is becoming as jerky as a cinematograph."

"I have noticed it myself," replied the Woman of the World; "I try to get in too much."

"The art of the *raconteur*," observed the Philosopher, "consists in avoiding the unessential. I have a friend who never yet to my knowledge reached the end of a story. It is intensely unimportant whether the name of the man who said the thing or did the deed be Brown or Jones or Robinson. But she will worry herself into a fever trying to recollect. 'Dear, dear me!' she will leave off to exclaim; 'I know his name so well. How stupid of me!' She will tell you why she ought to recollect his name, how she always has recollected his name till this precise moment. She will appeal to half the people in the room to help her. It is hopeless to try and induce her to proceed, the idea has taken possession of her mind. After a world of unnecessary trouble she recollects that it was Tomkins, and is delighted; only to be plunged again into despair on discovery that she has forgotten his address. This makes her so ashamed of herself she declines to continue, and full of self-reproach she retires to her own room. Later she re-enters, beaming, with the street and number pat. But by that time she has forgotten the anecdote."

"Well, tell us about your old lady, and what it was you said to her," spoke impatiently the Girton Girl, who is always eager when the subject under discussion happens to be the imbecility or criminal tendency of the opposite sex.

"I was at the age," continued the Woman of the World, "when a young girl tiring of fairy stories puts down the book and looks round her at the world, and naturally feels indignant at what she notices. I was very severe upon both the shortcomings and the overgoings of man - our natural enemy. My old friend used to laugh, and that made me think her callous and foolish.

One day our *bonne* - like all servants, a lover of gossip - came to us delighted with a story which proved to me how just had been my estimate of the male animal. The grocer at the corner of our *rue*, married only four years to a charming and devoted little wife, had run away and left her.

"'He never gave her even a hint, the pretty angel!'so Jeanne informed us. 'Had had his box containing his clothes and everything he wanted ready packed for a week, waiting for him at the railway station - just told her he was going to play a game of dominoes, and that she was not to sit up for him; kissed her and the child good-night, and - well, that was the last she ever saw of him. Did Madame ever hear the like of it?' concluded Jeanne, throwing up her hands to heaven. 'I am sorry to say, Jeanne, that I have,' replied my sweet Madame with a sigh, and led the conversation by slow degrees back to the subject of dinner. I turned to her when Jeanne had left the room. I can remember still the burning indignation of my face. I had often spoken to the man myself, and had thought what a delightful husband he was - so kind, so attentive, so proud, seemingly, of his dainty *femme*. 'Doesn't that prove what I say,' I cried, 'that men are beasts?' 'I am afraid it helps in that direction,' replied my old friend. 'And yet you defend them,' I answered. 'At my age, my dear,' she replied, 'one neither defends nor blames; one tries to understand.' She put her thin white hand upon my head. 'Shall we hear a little more of the story?' she said. 'It is not a pleasant one, but it may be useful to us.' 'I don't want to hear any more of it,' I answered; 'I have heard enough.' 'It is sometimes well,' she persisted, 'to hear the whole of a case before forming our judgment.' And she rang the bell for Jeanne. 'That story about our little grocer friend,' she said - 'it is rather interesting to me. Why did he leave her and run away - do you know?' Jeanne shrugged her ample shoulders. 'Oh! the old story, Madame,' she answered, with a short laugh. 'Who was she?' asked my friend. 'The wife of Monsieur Savary, the wheelwright, as good a husband as ever a woman had. It's been going on for months, the hussy!' 'Thank you, that will do, Jeanne.' She turned again to me so soon as Jeanne had left the room. 'My dear,' she said, 'whenever I see a bad man, I peep round the corner for the woman. Whenever I see a bad woman, I follow her eyes; I know she is looking for her mate. Nature never makes odd samples.'"

“I cannot help thinking,” said the Philosopher, “that a good deal of harm is being done to the race as a whole by the overpraise of women.”

“Who overpraises them?” demanded the Girton Girl. “Men may talk nonsense to us - I don’t know whether any of us are foolish enough to believe it - but I feel perfectly sure that when they are alone most of their time is occupied in abusing us.”

“That is hardly fair,” interrupted the Old Maid. “I doubt if they do talk about us among themselves as much as we think. Besides, it is always unwise to go behind the verdict. Some very beautiful things have been said about women by men.”

“Well, ask them,” said the Girton Girl. “Here are three of them present. Now, honestly, when you talk about us among yourselves, do you gush about our virtue, and goodness, and wisdom?”

“‘Gush,’” said the Philosopher, reflecting, “‘gush’ would hardly be the correct word.”

“In justice to the truth,” I said, “I must admit our Girton friend is to a certain extent correct. Every man at some time of his life esteems to excess some one particular woman. Very young men, lacking in experience, admire perhaps indiscriminately. To them, anything in a petticoat is adorable: the milliner makes the angel. And very old men, so I am told, return to the delusions of their youth; but as to this I cannot as yet speak positively. The rest of us - well, when we are alone, it must be confessed, as our Philosopher says, that ‘gush’ is not the correct word.”

“I told you so,” chortled the Girton Girl.

“Maybe,” I added, “it is merely the result of reaction. Convention insists that to her face we show her a somewhat exaggerated deference. Her very follies we have to regard as added charms - the poets have decreed it. Maybe it comes as a relief to let the pendulum swing back.”

“But is it not a fact,” asked the Old Maid, “that the best men and even the wisest are those who have held women in most esteem? Do we not gauge

civilization by the position a nation accords to its women?"

"In the same way as we judge them by the mildness of their laws, their tenderness for the weak. Uncivilised man killed off the useless numbers of the tribe; we provide for them hospitals, almshouses. Man's attitude towards woman proves the extent to which he has conquered his own selfishness, the distance he has travelled from the law of the ape: might is right.

"Please don't misunderstand me," pleaded the Philosopher, with a nervous glance towards the lowering eyebrows of the Girton Girl. "I am not saying for a moment woman is not the equal of man; indeed, it is my belief that she is. I am merely maintaining she is not his superior. The wise man honours woman as his friend, his fellow-labourer, his complement. It is the fool who imagines her unhuman."

"But are we not better," persisted the Old Maid, "for our ideals? I don't say we women are perfect - please don't think that. You are not more alive to our faults than we are. Read the women novelists from George Eliot downwards. But for your own sake - is it not well man should have something to look up to, and failing anything better - ?"

"I draw a very wide line," answered the Philosopher, "between ideals and delusions. The ideal has always helped man; but that belongs to the land of his dreams, his most important kingdom, the kingdom of his future. Delusions are earthly structures, that sooner or later fall about his ears, blinding him with dust and dirt. The petticoat-governed country has always paid dearly for its folly."

"Elizabeth!" cried the Girton Girl. "Queen Victoria!"

"Were ideal sovereigns," returned the Philosopher, "leaving the government of the country to its ablest men. France under its Pompadours, the Byzantine Empire under its Theodoras, are truer examples of my argument. I am speaking of the unwisdom of assuming all women to be perfect. Belisarius ruined himself and his people by believing his own wife to be an honest woman."

“But chivalry,” I argued, “has surely been of service to mankind?”

“To an immense extent,” agreed the Philosopher. “It seized a natural human passion and turned it to good uses. Then it was a reality. So once was the divine right of kings, the infallibility of the Church, for cumbering the ground with the lifeless bodies of which mankind has paid somewhat dearly. Not its upstanding lies - they can be faced and defeated - but its dead truths are the world’s stumbling-blocks. To the man of war and rapine, trained in cruelty and injustice, the woman was the one thing that spoke of the joy of yielding. Woman, as compared with man, was then an angel: it was no mere form of words. All the tender offices of life were in her hands. To the warrior, his life divided between fighting and debauchery, his womenfolk tending the sick, helping the weak, comforting the sorrowing, must have moved with white feet across a world his vices had made dark. Her mere subjection to the priesthood, her inborn feminine delight in form and ceremony - now an influence narrowing her charity - must then, to his dim eyes, trained to look upon dogma as the living soul of his religion, have seemed a halo, deifying her. Woman was then the servant. It was naturally to her advantage to excite tenderness and mercy in man. Since she has become the mistress of the world. It is no longer her interested mission to soften his savage instincts. Nowadays, it is the women who make war, the women who exalt brute force. Today, it is the woman who, happy herself, turns a deaf ear to the world’s low cry of pain; holding that man honoured who would ignore the good of the species to augment the comforts of his own particular family; holding in despite as a bad husband and father the man whose sense of duty extends beyond the circle of the home. One recalls Lady Nelson’s reproach to her lord after the battle of the Nile. ‘I have married a wife, and therefore cannot come,’ is the answer to his God that many a woman has prompted to her lover’s tongue. I was speaking to a woman only the other day about the cruelty of skinning seals alive. ‘I feel so sorry for the poor creatures,’ she murmured; ‘but they say it gives so much more depth of colour to the fur.’ Her own jacket was certainly a very beautiful specimen.”

“When I was editing a paper,” I said, “I opened my columns to a correspondence on this very subject. Many letters were sent to me - most of them trite, many of them foolish. One, a genuine document, I

remember. It came from a girl who for six years had been assistant to a fashionable dressmaker. She was rather tired of the axiom that all women, at all times, are perfection. She suggested that poets and novelists should take service for a year in any large drapery or millinery establishment where they would have an opportunity of studying woman in her natural state, so to speak."

"It is unfair to judge us by what, I confess, is our chief weakness," argued the Woman of the World. "Woman in pursuit of clothes ceases to be human - she reverts to the original brute. Besides, dressmakers can be very trying. The fault is not entirely on one side."

"I still fail to be convinced," remarked the Girton Girl, "that woman is over-praised. Not even the present conversation, so far as it has gone, altogether proves your point."

"I am not saying it is the case among intelligent thinkers," explained the Philosopher, "but in popular literature the convention still lingers. To woman's face no man cares to protest against it; and woman, to her harm, has come to accept it as a truism. 'What are little girls made of? Sugar and spice and all that's nice.' In more or less varied form the idea has entered into her blood, shutting out from her hope of improvement. The girl is discouraged from asking herself the occasionally needful question: Am I on the way to becoming a sound, useful member of society? Or am I in danger of degenerating into a vain, selfish, lazy piece of good-for-nothing rubbish? She is quite content so long as she can detect in herself no tendency to male vices, forgetful that there are also feminine vices. Woman is the spoilt child of the age. No one tells her of her faults. The World with its thousand voices flatters her. Sulks, bad temper, and pig-headed obstinacy are translated as 'pretty Fanny's wilful ways.' Cowardice, contemptible in man or woman, she is encouraged to cultivate as a charm. Incompetence to pack her own bag or find her own way across a square and round a corner is deemed an attraction. Abnormal ignorance and dense stupidity entitle her to pose as the poetical ideal. If she give a penny to a street beggar, selecting generally the fraud, or kiss a puppy's nose, we exhaust the language of eulogy, proclaiming her a saint. The

marvel to me is that, in spite of the folly upon which they are fed, so many of them grow to be sensible women."

"Myself," remarked the Minor Poet, "I find much comfort in the conviction that talk, as talk, is responsible for much less good and much less harm in the world than we who talk are apt to imagine. Words to grow and bear fruit must fall upon the earth of fact."

"But you hold it right to fight against folly?" demanded the Philosopher.

"Heavens, yes!" cried the Minor Poet. "That is how one knows it is Folly - if we can kill it. Against the Truth our arrows rattle harmlessly."

CHAPTER VI

“But what is her reason?” demanded the Old Maid.

“Reason! I don’t believe any of them have any reason.” The Woman of the World showed sign of being short of temper, a condition of affairs startlingly unusual to her. “Says she hasn’t enough work to do.”

“She must be an extraordinary woman,” commented the Old Maid.

“The trouble I have put myself to in order to keep that woman, just because George likes her savouries, no one would believe,” continued indignantly the Woman of the World. “We have had a dinner party regularly once a week for the last six months, entirely for her benefit. Now she wants me to give two. I won’t do it!”

“If I could be of any service?” offered the Minor Poet. “My digestion is not what it once was, but I could make up in quality - a *recherché* little banquet twice a week, say on Wednesdays and Saturdays, I would make a point of eating with you. If you think that would content her!”

“It is really thoughtful of you,” replied the Woman of the World, “but I cannot permit it. Why should you be dragged from the simple repast suitable to a poet merely to oblige my cook? It is not reason.”

“I was thinking rather of you,” continued the Minor Poet.

“I’ve half a mind,” said the Woman of the World, “to give up housekeeping altogether and go into an hotel. I don’t like the idea, but really servants are becoming impossible.”

“It is very interesting,” said the Minor Poet.

“I am glad you find it so!” snapped the Woman of the World.

“What is interesting?” I asked the Minor Poet.

“That the tendency of the age,” he replied, “should be slowly but surely driving us into the practical adoption of a social state that for years we have been denouncing the Socialists for merely suggesting. Everywhere the public-houses are multiplying, the private dwellings diminishing.”

“Can you wonder at it?” commented the Woman of the World. “You men talk about ‘the joys of home.’ Some of you write poetry - generally speaking, one of you who lives in chambers, and spends two-thirds of his day at a club.” We were sitting in the garden. The attention of the Minor Poet became riveted upon the sunset. “‘Ethel and I by the fire.’ Ethel never gets a chance of sitting by the fire. So long as you are there, comfortable, you do not notice that she has left the room to demand explanation why the drawing-room scuttle is always filled with slack, and the best coal burnt in the kitchen range. Home to us women is our place of business that we never get away from.”

“I suppose,” said the Girton Girl - to my surprise she spoke with entire absence of indignation. As a rule, the Girton Girl stands for what has been termed “divine discontent” with things in general. In the course of time she will outlive her surprise at finding the world so much less satisfactory an abode than she had been led to suppose - also her present firm conviction that, given a free hand, she could put the whole thing right in a quarter of an hour. There are times even now when her tone suggests less certainty of her being the first person who has ever thought seriously about the matter. “I suppose,” said the Girton Girl, “it comes of education. Our grandmothers were content to fill their lives with these small household duties. They rose early, worked with their servants, saw to everything with their own eyes. Nowadays we demand time for self-development, for reading, for thinking, for pleasure. Household drudgery, instead of being the object of our life, has become an interference to it. We resent it.”

“The present revolt of woman,” continued the Minor Poet, “will be looked back upon by the historian of the future as one of the chief factors in our social evolution. The ‘home’ - the praises of which we still sing, but with

gathering misgiving - depended on her willingness to live a life of practical slavery. When Adam delved and Eve span - Adam confining his delving to the space within his own fence, Eve staying her spinning-wheel the instant the family hosiery was complete - then the home rested upon the solid basis of an actual fact. Its foundations were shaken when the man became a citizen and his interests expanded beyond the domestic circle. Since that moment woman alone has supported the institution. Now she, in her turn, is claiming the right to enter the community, to escape from the solitary confinement of the lover's castle. The 'mansions,' with common dining-rooms, reading-rooms, their system of common service, are springing up in every quarter; the house, the villa, is disappearing. The story is the same in every country. The separate dwelling, where it remains, is being absorbed into a system. In America, the experimental laboratory of the future, the houses are warmed from a common furnace. You do not light the fire, you turn on the hot air. Your dinner is brought round to you in a travelling oven. You subscribe for your valet or your lady's maid. Very soon the private establishment, with its staff of unorganised, quarrelling servants, of necessity either over or underworked, will be as extinct as the lake dwelling or the sandstone cave."

"I hope," said the Woman of the World, "that I may live to see it."

"In all probability," replied the Minor Poet, "you will. I would I could feel as hopeful for myself."

"If your prophecy be likely of fulfilment," remarked the Philosopher, "I console myself with the reflection that I am the oldest of the party. Myself; I never read these full and exhaustive reports of the next century without revelling in the reflection that before they can be achieved I shall be dead and buried. It may be a selfish attitude, but I should be quite unable to face any of the machine-made futures our growing guild of seers prognosticate. You appear to me, most of you, to ignore a somewhat important consideration - namely, that mankind is alive. You work out your answers as if he were a sum in rule-of-three: 'If man in so many thousands of years has done so much in such a direction at this or that rate of speed, what will he be doing - ?' and so on. You forget he is swayed by

impulses that can enter into no calculation - drawn hither and thither by powers that can never be represented in your algebra. In one generation Christianity reduced Plato's republic to an absurdity. The printing-press has upset the unanswerable conclusions of Machiavelli."

"I disagree with you," said the Minor Poet.

"The fact does not convince me of my error," retorted the Philosopher.

"Christianity," continued the Minor Poet, "gave merely an added force to impulses the germs of which were present in the infant race. The printing-press, teaching us to think in communities, has nonplussed to a certain extent the aims of the individual as opposed to those of humanity. Without prejudice, without sentiment, cast your eye back over the panorama of the human race. What is the picture that presents itself? Scattered here and there over the wild, voiceless desert, first the holes and caves, next the rude-built huts, the wigwams, the lake dwellings of primitive man. Lonely, solitary, followed by his dam and brood, he creeps through the tall grass, ever with watchful, terror-haunted eyes; satisfies his few desires; communicates, by means of a few grunts and signs, his tiny store of knowledge to his offspring; then, crawling beneath a stone, or into some tangled corner of the jungle, dies and disappears. We look again. A thousand centuries have flashed and faded. The surface of the earth is flecked with strange quivering patches: here, where the sun shines on the wood and sea, close together, almost touching one another; there, among the shadows, far apart. The Tribe has formed itself. The whole tiny mass moves forward, halts, runs backwards, stirred always by one common impulse. Man has learnt the secret of combination, of mutual help. The City rises. From its stone centre spreads its power; the Nation leaps to life; civilisation springs from leisure; no longer is each man's life devoted to his mere animal necessities. The artificer, the thinker - his fellows shall protect him. Socrates dreams, Phidias carves the marble, while Pericles maintains the law and Leonidas holds the Barbarian at bay. Europe annexes piece by piece the dark places of the earth, gives to them her laws. The Empire swallows the small State; Russia stretches her arm round Asia. In London we toast the union of the English-speaking peoples; in Berlin and Vienna we rub a salamander to the *deutscher Bund*;

in Paris we whisper of a communion of the Latin races. In great things so in small. The stores, the huge Emporium displaces the small shopkeeper; the Trust amalgamates a hundred firms; the Union speaks for the worker. The limits of country, of language, are found too narrow for the new Ideas. German, American, or English - let what yard of coloured cotton you choose float from the mizzenmast, the business of the human race is their captain. One hundred and fifty years ago old Sam Johnson waited in a patron's anteroom; today the entire world invites him to growl his table talk the while it takes its dish of tea. The poet, the novelist, speak in twenty languages. Nationality - it is the County Council of the future. The world's high roads run turnpike-free from pole to pole. One would be blind not to see the goal towards which we are rushing. At the outside it is but a generation or two off. It is one huge murmuring Hive - one universal Hive just the size of the round earth. The bees have been before us; they have solved the riddle towards which we in darkness have been groping.

The Old Maid shuddered visibly. "What a terrible idea!" she said.

"To us," replied the Minor Poet; "not to those who will come after us. The child dreads manhood. To Abraham, roaming the world with his flocks, the life of your modern City man, chained to his office from ten to four, would have seemed little better than penal servitude."

"My sympathies are with the Abrahamitical ideal," observed the Philosopher.

"Mine also," agreed the Minor Poet. "But neither you nor I represent the tendency of the age. We are its curiosities. We, and such as we, serve as the brake regulating the rate of progress. The genius of species shows itself moving in the direction of the organised community - all life welded together, controlled by one central idea. The individual worker is drawn into the factory. Chippendale today would have been employed sketching designs; the chair would have been put together by fifty workers, each one trained to perfection in his own particular department. Why does the hotel, with its five hundred servants, its catering for three thousand mouths, work smoothly, while the desirable family residence, with its two or three domestics, remains the scene of waste, confusion, and dispute?

We are losing the talent of living alone; the instinct of living in communities is driving it out."

"So much the worse for the community," was the comment of the Philosopher. "Man, as Ibsen has said, will always be at his greatest when he stands alone. To return to our friend Abraham, surely he, wandering in the wilderness, talking with his God, was nearer the ideal than the modern citizen, thinking with his morning paper, applauding silly shibboleths from a theatre pit, guffawing at coarse jests, one of a music-hall crowd? In the community it is the lowest always leads. You spoke just now of all the world inviting Samuel Johnson to its dish of tea. How many read him as compared to the number of subscribers to the *Ha'penny Joker*? This 'thinking in communities,' as it is termed, to what does it lead? To mafficking and Dreyfus scandals. What crowd ever evolved a noble idea? If Socrates and Galileo, Confucius and Christ had 'thought in communities,' the world would indeed be the ant-hill you appear to regard as its destiny."

"In balancing the books of life one must have regard to both sides of the ledger," responded the Minor Poet. "A crowd, I admit, of itself creates nothing; on the other hand, it receives ideals into its bosom and gives them needful shelter. It responds more readily to good than to evil. What greater stronghold of virtue than your sixpenny gallery? Your burglar, arrived fresh from jumping on his mother, finds himself applauding with the rest stirring appeals to the inborn chivalry of man. Suggestion that it was right or proper under any circumstances to jump upon one's mother he would at such moment reject with horror. 'Thinking in communities' is good for him. The hooligan, whose patriotism finds expression in squirting dirty water into the face of his coster sweetheart: the *boulevardière*, primed with absinth, shouting '*Conspuez les Juifs*!' - the motive force stirring them in its origin was an ideal. Even into making a fool of itself, a crowd can be moved only by incitement of its finer instincts. The service of Prometheus to mankind must not be judged by the statistics of the insurance office. The world as a whole has gained by community, will attain its goal only through community. From the nomadic savage by the winding road of citizenship we have advanced far. The way winds upward still, hidden from us by the mists, but along its

tortuous course lies our track into the Promised Land. Not the development of the individual - that is his own concern - but the uplifting of the race would appear to be the law. The lonely great ones, they are the shepherds of the flock - the servants, not the masters of the world. Moses shall die and be buried in the wilderness, seeing only from afar the resting-place of man's tired feet. It is unfortunate that the *Ha'penny Joker* and its kind should have so many readers. Maybe it teaches those to read who otherwise would never read at all. We are impatient, forgetting that the coming and going of our generations are but as the swinging of the pendulum of Nature's clock. Yesterday we booked our seats for gladiatorial shows, for the burning of Christians, our windows for Newgate hangings. Even the musical farce is an improvement upon that - at least, from the humanitarian point of view."

"In the Southern States of America," observed the Philosopher, sticking to his guns, "they run excursion trains to lynching exhibitions. The bull-fight is spreading to France, and English newspapers are advocating the reintroduction of bear-baiting and cock-fighting. Are we not moving in a circle?"

"The road winds, as I have allowed," returned the Minor Poet; "the gradient is somewhat steep. Just now, maybe, we are traversing a backward curve. I gain my faith by pausing now and then to look behind. I see the weary way with many a downward sweep. But we are climbing, my friend, we are climbing."

"But to such a very dismal goal, according to your theory," grumbled the Old Maid. "I should hate to feel myself an insect in a hive, my little round of duties apportioned to me, my every action regulated by a fixed law, my place assigned to me, my very food and drink, I suppose, apportioned to me. Do think of something more cheerful."

The Minor Poet laughed. "My dear lady," he replied, "it is too late. The thing is already done. The hive already covers us, the cells are in building. Who leads his own life? Who is master of himself? What can you do but live according to your income in, I am sure, a very charming little cell; buzz about your little world with your cheerful, kindly song, helping these your fellow insects here, doing day by day the useful offices

apportioned to you by your temperament and means, seeing the same faces, treading ever the same narrow circle? Why do I write poetry? I am not to blame. I must live. It is the only thing I can do. Why does one man live and die upon the treeless rocks of Iceland, another labour in the vineyards of the Apennines? Why does one woman make matches, ride in a van to Epping Forest, drink gin, and change hats with her lover on the homeward journey; another pant through a dinner-party and half a dozen receptions every night from March to June, rush from country house to fashionable Continental resort from July to February, dress as she is instructed by her milliner, say the smart things that are expected of her? Who would be a sweep or a chaperon, were all roads free? Who is it succeeds in escaping the law of the hive? The loafer, the tramp. On the other hand, who is the man we respect and envy? The man who works for the community, the public-spirited man, as we call him; the unselfish man, the man who labours for the labour's sake and not for the profit, devoting his days and nights to learning Nature's secrets, to acquiring knowledge useful to the race. Is he not the happiest, the man who has conquered his own sordid desires, who gives himself to the public good? The hive was founded in dark days before man knew; it has been built according to false laws. This man will have a cell bigger than any other cell; all the other little men shall envy him; a thousand fellow-crawling mites shall slave for him, wear out their lives in wretchedness for him and him alone; all their honey they shall bring to him; he shall gorge while they shall starve. Of what use? He has slept no sounder in his foolishly fanciful cell. Sleep is to tired eyes, not to silken coverlets. We dream in Seven Dials as in Park Lane. His stomach, distend it as he will - it is very small - resents being distended. The store of honey rots. The hive was conceived in the dark days of ignorance, stupidity, brutality. A new hive shall arise."

"I had no idea," said the Woman of the World, "you were a Socialist."

"Nor had I," agreed the Minor Poet, "before I began talking."

"And next Wednesday," laughed the Woman of the World; "you will be arguing in favour of individualism."

"Very likely," agreed the Minor Poet. "'The deep moans round with many voices.'"

“I’ll take another cup of tea,” said the Philosopher.